

# Can Social Media Create a Better Society?

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/03/15/can-social-media-create-a-better-society/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/03/15/can-social-media-create-a-better-society/)

2011-3-15

*"Can Social Media Create a Better Society?" This was the question I was asked to answer, along with Janan Ganesh (The Economist) and Suzanne Moore (The Guardian) at a [StoneClub](#) gathering. These are the notes for my introductory remarks.*

So, Can Social Media Create a Better Society? My answer to this question is No.

Media can't create anything, people do.

And by people I mean individuals, groups and communities acting as part of a whole series of social, economic and political trends.

But I do think that media can play a catalytical role that is becoming more powerful.

This is partly because the communications technologies are becoming more personalized and more globalised.

But also because we live in a much more mediated world where information is abundant and essential to modern life.

So media matters, but our research at POLIS shows that what we are seeing is a co-evolution between the human and social forces and the media technology. Digital technologies do not drive alone. And the outcome of that process may be creating a new kind of networked politics.

Take the recent uprisings in the middle east.

How do we get from one man setting fire to himself in Tunisia to hundreds of thousands protesting in a square in central Cairo? How do we get from a YouTube video or a Facebook page to the greatest demonstration of democratic power in that region for at least half a century?

Here are some of the ingredients that go into the revolutionary recipe.

First, take a young population in an area that has seen increasing national wealth AND increasing inequality.

Add in increasing amounts of both primary but most importantly higher education. Leave for a while to let expectations rise.

Now remove all the best bits and keep them for yourself and your family. Let the rest sink into a recession.

Then beat thoroughly with secret police.

Now as this comes to the boil, add in some social media – perhaps Facebook and Youtube with a soupcon of Twitter. Mix this well with some mobile telephones, email and even popular music. Now sprinkle large amounts of information from regional or global TV news channels.

This is how we make a Middle East revolution.

Of course, as we have seen in China and Iran – the authorities have the same technologies – they can use media, including new media – to control both the message and people.

And very often – as we have seen in Libya – guns and airplanes can outfight a YouTube video.

But what I think is interesting is how this new kind of uprising is creating a new kind of politics.

It is without leaders.

It is diffuse.

It takes weak ties and through networking combines them into strong movements.

I think that is very much the spirit of the age. Across the world we are sick of following leaders. We don't like joining old-fashioned political parties. We want our governments to listen as well as preach. We like interactive and collaborative change.

That is why I think what happened in Tunisia and Egypt resonates across the world. It's why in the UK, too, social media is now part of the fabric of social and political debate and activism. If we want to change something we use media that we create ourselves.

But what we choose to do with it depends on us, not on the programmers.

We need to know much more about how this works. There is still too much talk from marketing people of all kinds about the miracle of the Internet. Too many people who think that it's a silver bullet. That kind of talk can actually create the backlash we have seen recently where people try to blame digital technologies for all the world's ills, in the same way that my mum used to blame telly for my behaviour as a teenager.

So at POLIS we're looking at how social media is now part of mainstream media – it's what I call Networked Journalism – look at how everyone from Al Jazeera to the Economist uses citizen journalism – can you imagine the coverage of Libya or Japan, for example, without mobile phone video?

We're looking at how new journalism practices such as WikiLeaks are changing political information systems like Diplomacy – as well as forcing mainstream media to meet people's expectations of transparency.

And we're looking at how social media can be used to empower people with information and a voice in real issues like healthcare, both here in the UK and in places like Africa.

These may not be revolutions. Social Media does not guarantee positive outcomes. But in the longer term I think that with good research and critical thinking we can use it to contribute to creating a better society.

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